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## point of view

## Terrence McNally: Theater as Connection

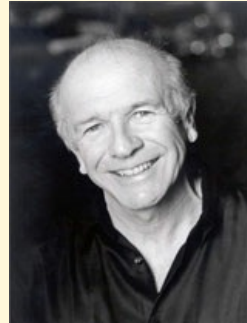
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## Terrence McNally: Theater as Connection

by [Raymond-Jean Frontain](#)

The career of four-time Tony Award-winning playwright Terrence McNally is remarkable for both the range of its accomplishments and the depth of its contradictions.

First, he has resisted identifying with any particular cultural scene. Initially active in the burgeoning Off-Broadway theater movement in the 1960s, McNally is one of the few playwrights of his generation to have successfully made the transition to Broadway, and, in the process, passed from avant garde to mainstream acclaim.



Terrence McNally.

The confusion that critics had typing him early in his career is suggested by the fact that his first play, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, which was produced on Broadway in 1965, was for many years included in an influential anthology of Off-Broadway plays. Yet in the late 1990s and 2000s, as Broadway productions became too top-heavy for their own good, he made a transition again, this time with ease to regional theaters, where his plays were initially produced before transferring to New York, often to a non-Broadway stage in the midtown theater district. Well might McNally sing, like Carlotta in Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, "I've seen it all and, my dear, I'm still here."

Second, McNally has seen—or, more properly, done—it all in terms of his dramaturgy as well. Initially celebrated as the author of dark, absurdist social satires and political protest plays, he made the transition gradually to a period of more broadly farcical comedy.

However, following the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the mid-1980s, his plays became increasingly more lyrical meditations upon the causes of human isolation, the underlying sources of hatred and prejudice, and the need for interpersonal connection.

Yet since the premiere of *Master Class* in 1995, his plays have been concerned with the nature of aesthetic experience and the human need for art, most prominently opera and theater. His range has been such that there is no such thing as a characteristically "McNally play" as there is a distinctively Shavian or Pinteresque mode of drama.

Third, as a playwright who is deeply engaged by music, McNally has straddled the divide between music and theater circles. He has written the book for multiple musicals, as well as the libretto for several operas. He may be the only prominent American playwright whose actual voice is more familiar to opera fans than to theatergoers, inasmuch as for nearly thirty years (1979-2008) he was a member of the Texaco Opera Quiz panel that fielded questions during the weekly *Live from the Met* radio broadcasts.

Finally, and, perhaps most paradoxically, McNally is a gay man who has never been in the closet; who introduced self-respecting gay characters in his plays as early as 1964; who authored several of the most important American plays produced in response to the AIDS pandemic; who has been a tireless speaker on behalf of gay civil rights issues; and whose civil unions with, and/or marriages to, Gary Bonasorte and (following the latter's death) Tom Kirdahy have attracted national notice. Yet to the dismay of many gay activists, he declines to be identified as a "gay playwright."

Despite that refusal, he is recognized as one of the most important playwrights of his generation, if not the most accomplished American gay playwright since Tennessee Williams.

## Biography

Michael Terrence McNally was born November 3, 1938 in St. Petersburg, Florida, to Hubert and Dorothy (Rapp) McNally, a pair of transplanted New Yorkers who ran a seaside bar and grill called The Pelican Club. (Ironically, while trying early in his career to appear

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more precocious, McNally once misrepresented his year of birth as 1939, a piece of misinformation that has been widely reprinted since.) His only sibling, Peter, was born six years later.

McNally has described his parents as convivial people who enjoyed socializing. After a hurricane destroyed their establishment in St. Petersburg, the family returned initially to Port Chester, New York, then moved to Dallas when the playwright was eleven, and three years later to Corpus Christi, where McNally "père" purchased and managed a Schlitz beer distributorship.

McNally's earliest full-length play, *This Side of the Door*, produced in an Actor's Studio workshop in 1962 featuring a young Estelle Parsons, deals with a sensitive boy's battle of wills with his overbearing father, a theme that pervades a number of McNally's early, mostly unpublished plays that the playwright acknowledges are partially autobiographical.

But whatever the nature of the tension between McNally and his father as the boy was growing up, the playwright has also written movingly of his parents volunteering to listen to an important football game on their car radio while sitting in the driveway so that their pubescent son would not miss a Saturday afternoon opera broadcast on the better radio in the parlor.

McNally's parents enjoyed Broadway musicals, and would leave on the coffee table the *Playbills* from their occasional trips to New York. When McNally was around eight years old, his parents took him to see *Annie Get Your Gun*, starring Ethel Merman. On a subsequent outing McNally saw Gertrude Lawrence in *The King and I*, but it was Merman's performance that made a more lasting impression on him. In 1979, when Merman announced her retirement from the stage, McNally was writing a column for the *New York Guide*, a short-lived weekly newspaper. In an open letter to Merman he pointedly yet plaintively told her that "Queens do not abdicate."

McNally was introduced to opera while in the middle grades at Christ the King School in Dallas by an Ursuline nun who would bring recordings of Puccini duets to class on Friday afternoons. He subsequently discovered the Saturday afternoon *Live from the Met* radio broadcasts, and in advance of each week's performance would make small figures of the characters that he could move about on a proscenium stage constructed from a shoe box as he followed the broadcast. In high school he busied tables at a Peter Pan Cafeteria to earn the money with which to buy opera records.

At W. B. Ray High School in Corpus Christi, McNally became one of the devoted proteges of Maureen McElroy, a gifted English teacher who invited a select group of students to her home afternoons after school for music and conversation.

She was the first person to encourage McNally to write (although, because the young McNally did not understand that Ira was a man's name, his first effort—written in a juvenile hand on lined notebook paper preserved in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas—dramatized how composer George Gershwin met and married his supposedly *female* lyricist, who was in actuality his *brother*).

When the time came for McNally to apply to colleges, McElroy encouraged him to concentrate on schools outside Texas to ensure that he developed as broad a view of the world as possible. Eventually McNally would dedicate *Apple Pie* and *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* to her, and in several of his plays praises her by name for her ability to instill in young minds a love of Shakespeare. When she died in 2005, he supplied the inscription for her tombstone: "Not just an English teacher, but a life teacher."

In 1956, seventeen-year-old McNally matriculated as a journalism major at Columbia College, the undergraduate arm of Columbia University, from which he would graduate Phi Beta Kappa with a B. A. in English in 1960. His years there were part of Columbia's golden age of instruction, and his teachers included such extraordinary figures as Meyer Schapiro for art history, Eric Bentley for drama, and Lionel Trilling for literature.

But he was particularly influenced by Andrew Chiappe, who had succeeded Mark Van Doren as the mesmerizing lecturer in a popular two-semester course on Shakespeare in which students read every one of the bard's plays roughly in the order of their composition.

In his senior year at Columbia, McNally wrote the campus variety show, which featured music by fellow student Edward L. Kleban (who would go on to share the Pulitzer Prize for *A Chorus Line*), and was directed by Michael P. Kahn (who would later serve as the artistic director of the Folger Shakespeare Library's theater in Washington, D.C.).

During his college years, McNally returned to Texas each summer to work as a cub reporter for the local newspaper, the *Corpus Christi Times-Caller*. His career in journalism was cut short when he reported that during his interview with political maverick (and future president) Lyndon Baines Johnson, the politician sat idly thumbing

through a magazine featuring naked women as he took a call from his wife.

McNally's interest in journalism was quickly replaced by his growing interest in music and theater. Upon arriving in New York, McNally had begun attending theater and opera on an almost daily basis. Student-discounted prices made it possible for him to attend several plays a week. In a recent interview, he warmly recalled the community that formed among those who waited in line for Standing Room tickets at the Metropolitan Opera, where he attended Maria Callas's explosive American debut in *Norma*.

His Manhattan social sphere would eventually extend to the gay bars that operated in Greenwich Village, where patrons might spend an evening drinking and singing with a down-on-her-luck Judy Garland. He movingly memorializes both Garland and the gay piano bar culture of the 1960s in the Stonewall scene of *Some Men* (2007).

Early in 1960, McNally's interest in theater brought him an invitation to a party where, departing, he shared a cab with Edward Albee. Having recently written the ground-breaking Off-Broadway dramas, *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *The Sandbox* (1959), Albee was about to become the single most influential playwright in America.

The twenty-one-year-old college senior soon moved in with the thirty-one-year-old playwright. They functioned as a couple for over four years, during the period when Albee would write and/or first see produced such groundbreaking plays as *The American Dream* (1960) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Albee biographer Mel Gussow claims that Martha's praise of her imaginary son's fine blond hair that became "fleece" in the summer sun, and his ambivalently "blue, green, brown" eyes, is Albee's affectionate inscription of his boyish lover in what remains Albee's most famous play.

After McNally and Albee's relationship had waned, McNally entered into a long-term relationship with handsome, talented actor Robert Drivas. McNally credits Drivas with reigniting his passion for writing after his first professionally produced play, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, was savaged by critics.

McNally would subsequently write *Witness* (1968), *Sweet Eros* (1968), and, most importantly, *Where Has Tommy Flowers Gone?* (1971) for Drivas. In 1973 Drivas joined McNally at Yale University on a fellowship during the course of which McNally wrote a farce titled *The Tubs* about a straight man who inadvertently takes refuge on a stormy night in a Mafia-owned gay bathhouse.

When the play premiered on Broadway, retitled *The Ritz* and directed by Drivas, it was the surprise hit of the 1974 season. Drivas also directed McNally's Obie Award-winning *Bad Habits* (1974). Although McNally and Drivas broke up as a couple in 1976, they remained close friends until Drivas died of AIDS-related complications ten years later.

McNally has subsequently partnered with actor Dominic Cuskern, who originated the role of the Conductor in "Prelude & Liebestod" (2004) as well as the title role in *A Perfect Ganesh* (1993); Gary Bonasorte, a playwright and founding member of the Rattlestick Theater Company, with whom McNally fell in love in 1993, but lost to an AIDS-related illness in November 2001; and Tom Kirdahy, a public interest attorney with whom McNally entered into a civil union on December 20, 2003, in Dover, Vermont, and married in Washington, D.C., on April 6, 2010.

Kirdahy has served as a producer for the New York premiere or Broadway revival of every one of McNally's plays since *Some Men* in 2007.

Wasserstein biographer Julie Salamon reports that, in addition to his long-term relationships with male partners, McNally had an affair with fellow playwright (and sometime collaborator) Wendy Wasserstein between October 1987 and September 1990, and inspired the character Geoffrey, a bisexual theater director, in her play *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1993). Still, McNally identifies exclusively as gay rather than bisexual.

McNally's respect for the communal nature of theater is evident in his work habits. Early on he collaborated with Leonard Melfi and Israel Horowitz on three trilogies of one-acters (*Morning, Noon, and Night*, 1968; "Cigarettes, Whiskey, and Wild, Wild Women," 1973; and *Faith, Hope, and Charity*, 1988) in which the playwrights shared a cast, a set, and a general concept, but wrote independently of one another.

He continued the practice with Joseph Pintauro and Lanford Wilson (*By the Sea, By the Sea, By the Beautiful Sea*, 1996), and, with a slight variation, with Jon Robin Baitz (*House*, 1998). He has also twice taken part in The Twenty-Four Hour Plays festival in which playwrights write one-acters, which are then cast, rehearsed, and performed all within twenty-four hours ("The Sunday Times," 2006; and "Teachers Break," 2008).

From 1985 until 1998, McNally's plays were initially produced at the

Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC), which he credits with allowing him the freedom to pursue new ideas without worrying about their commercial appeal. Although McNally and artistic director Lynne Meadow suffered a falling-out in 2009 following MTC's initial (but subsequently reversed) decision to cancel their production of *Corpus Christi*—complicated by her reluctance to stage McNally's *Dedication*—they recombined forces in 2011 with a Tony-nominated revival of *Master Class*. In 2012, MTC sponsored the New York premiere of McNally's *Golden Age*.

McNally says that he prefers to write with the voice in his head of the actor who will play the part, and that he is happiest working with those actors who "hear my voice and get my humor."

Not surprisingly, he has collaborated repeatedly with some of the finest stage actors of the day: Robert Drivas, James Coco, Doris Roberts, Charlotte Rae, Kathy Bates, F. Murray Abraham, Nathan Lane, Christine Baranski, Richard Thomas, Faith Prince, Anthony Heald, Zoe Caldwell, Audra MacDonal, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Marian Seldes, Angela Lansbury, Chita Rivera, Tyne Daly, and John Glover.

While there may not be such a thing as a typical McNally play, there may well be a "McNally actor": one who is adept at comedy, yet able to shift suddenly and seamlessly to haunting pathos.

McNally's extraordinary productivity has been affected, but not hindered, by the occurrence of lung cancer in November 2001, and its recurrence in May 2007. (The incidence of esophageal cancer and tuberculosis drives the plots of *Dedication* and *Golden Age*, respectively.)

In 1999, McNally stepped down as Vice President of the Dramatists Guild, where for eighteen years he had proven a powerful voice for the right of the playwright to control his/her text and for the preservation of Manhattan's landmark theater buildings, as well as a leader in the theater community on issues related to AIDS research and social services for the HIV-infected.

In 1998, McNally was awarded an honorary degree by The Juilliard School in recognition of his having revived—in conjunction with colleague John Guare—the school's moribund play-writing division. On the occasion of McNally's seventieth birthday, Sardi's restaurant (in the heart of New York City's theater district) unveiled its caricature of the playwright. In spring 2010 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D. C., dedicated all three of its stages to revivals of *The Lisbon Traviata* and *Master Class* in tandem with a production of a Kennedy Center-commissioned new play, *Golden Age*, under the title "Terrence McNally's Nights at the Opera."

### **"Unwitnessed, unheard, alone"**

The American premiere of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* on January 14, 1960 is generally credited with launching a vibrant avant-garde American theater movement. As playwright John Guare recalls, in the 1960s "we all wrote our own version of *Zoo Story*. Albee spawned an entire generation of park bench plays. Theater for years became littered with park benches. To show you were avant-garde, you needed no more than a dark room and a park bench."

McNally initially followed Albee's lead, but with a significant difference. For, as willing as Albee was to challenge social norms and theater conventions, he insisted on keeping his own sexual orientation private, and did not acknowledge outright the sexuality of his *Zoo Story* characters until he wrote *Peter and Jerry* in 2007.

In contrast, McNally begins the action of his first professionally produced play, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1965), in the moments *after* Clarence and Sigfrid have met in a park and gone to the bunker-like home of the charismatic Sigfrid to have sex.

Unbeknownst to Clarence, Sigfrid's mother and sister photograph the men's bedroom activities, only to turn the images into a slide show used to humiliate Clarence. Fleeing his tormentors, the young man is electrocuted on the security fence that the family has erected around its property. As in *The Zoo Story*, Clarence and Sigfrid's encounter in the park culminates in the violent death of one of the

men.

But whereas it would take the iconoclastic Albee forty-seven years to put homosexuality squarely on stage, the twenty-six-year-old McNally did so—much to the rabid dismay of New York's conservative theater critics—in his first Broadway play.

McNally's early plays were a part of the social protest movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly the anti-war movement. For example, *Tour* (1967) dramatizes the disengagement of a middle-class American couple as they view the poverty and suffering of a third world nation in the throes of a revolution from the air-conditioned security of their automobile, an effective correlative for American disdain for the Vietnamese people whom American armies were supposedly fighting at the time to protect.

Likewise, in *Botticelli* (1968), two American soldiers make a game of the great names in Western civilization to pass time as they stand guard against the enemy in the jungle; their veneer of culture functions as a foil to the brutal indifference with which they mow down an emaciated Viet Cong soldier who ventures into a clearing looking for food.

Similarly, in *Bringing It All Back Home* (1970), McNally's most Albee-esque play, the delivery of a son and brother's coffin from the Vietnam battlefield exposes the emptiness of the American Dream that the war was supposedly being fought to protect.

Collectively, these early plays form a dark satire on American moral complacency. *Cuba Si!* (1968), written to be performed by Academy Award-winning actress Melina Mercouri at a rally at Madison Square Garden protesting the military junta that had taken power in her native Greece, satirizes the disdain that contemporary America—a country born from a revolution—now has for the very idea of the same. As the play's militant female freedom fighter tells a news reporter, "if everyone in the world doesn't care about the revolution, then there will never be one."

Likewise, in *Witness* (1968), which McNally termed "a comedy of violence," a public opinion survey taker and a window washer stumble into a high-rise apartment on the day that a presidential motorcade is scheduled to pass in the street below; they prove unable to prevent an assassination that echoes John F. Kennedy's in Dallas five years earlier. And in *Where Has Tommy Flowers Gone?* (1971), McNally celebrates (and rues its ultimate ineffectiveness) the American youth movement's conviction that "blowing this country up so we can start all over again" is the only way to create an America they respect.

Violence pervades McNally's early plays, particularly in terms of sexual relations. In *Sweet Eros* (1968), a young man pours out his heart to the naked woman whom he has gagged and bound to a chair, as though the only form of interpersonal connection that one can establish in a violent world is through force. In *Let It Bleed* (1972), a young couple, while showering after making love, grow convinced that an intruder lurks on the other side of the shower curtain, a haunting anticipation of the opening scene of McNally's libretto for *Dead Man Walking* nearly thirty years later. In *Let It Bleed*, the emotional and physical nakedness that one must allow in order to experience love also leaves one vulnerable to suspicion and fear.

Surely the best of McNally's early plays, and the one that earned McNally his greatest early acclaim, is *Next* (1968), in which a married, middle-aged, overweight businessman is surprised to be summoned for a pre-induction physical. Assuming that the Army will rectify its error once the medical officer sees how unfit he is for service, Marion passes from mortification at having to strip and reveal his ungainly physique, to outrage at the absurdity of his situation, and, finally, to blind terror in the face of an implacable, totalitarian agency that has no respect for human life or individual dignity.

The vulnerability of protagonists like the young lovers in *Let It Bleed*, Clarence in *And Things That Go Bump*, and Marion in *Next* reflects a young playwright's uncertainty about how one may meet the demands of a brutal world that does not value, in Clarence's words, "Florence, Shakespeare, and [the chance to connect with] someone in the park." The sensitive person is in danger of dying "unwitnessed, unheard, alone" (as, ironically, Ruby fears in *And Things That Go Bump*)—unheard except, of course, by the young playwright who attempts to give such persons a voice.

But these early plays also reveal a playwright who has not yet developed a coherent vision of the world. Like so many of his contemporaries, McNally offers a sharp analysis of the failure of the American Dream. (Three of these early short plays were televised in 1968 under the ironic title *Apple Pie*.) By the early 1970s he was certain of what values and behaviors had led to the rending of the American social fabric, but he had yet to conclude what he might propose to take their place. That is, although he understood clearly what disappointed him about his society, he remained uncertain how to identify and celebrate what he valued most.

## "I can't believe this whole night"

In 1969, when asked to adapt *Next* for the screen, McNally confided to an interviewer that he would do so without leaving New York for Hollywood: "I write well. I am careful about selecting words. I care that my characters express themselves well. That's not what Hollywood wants. When I was in Hollywood and read some scripts[,] I was struck dumb by how little dialog is in them."

Ironically, McNally would spend the better part of the period from 1979 to 1984 in southern California, writing several pilots for Norman Lear, the successful producer of such ground-breaking television situation comedies as *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons*.

McNally's proposed sitcoms are not common television fare. Like Burt Shrevelove, Larry Gelbart, and Stephen Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), "XIII Skidoo" was set in classical Rome and was influenced by the comedies of Plautus and McNally's namesake, Terence. Another, "The Education of Young Harry Bellair, Esq.," was set in early eighteenth-century London and appropriated the conventions and character types of Restoration comedies of manners. A third, "Positively Tenth Street," was set in the same West Village neighborhood in lower Manhattan that McNally had inhabited since graduating from college (and which in 2008 he would celebrate in *Unusual Acts of Devotion*).

What these scripts have in common—and presumably the reason that none was optioned—is that, as McNally feared would be the case in Hollywood, they rely heavily upon sharp, witty dialogue at a time when slapstick sitcoms like *Happy Days* and *Three's Company* ruled the airwaves.

McNally enjoyed a modest success, however, with his pilot for *Mama Malone* about an Italian widow who conducts a televised cooking show from her Brooklyn apartment while dispensing advice to family, neighbors, and her program's viewers. The show aired as a mid-season replacement series on CBS from March 7 through July 21, 1983.

In addition, actor-director Barbra Streisand optioned but never filmed a script titled "Bananas," a dramedy about a pair of married lawyers on opposing sides in a divorce trial that pays homage to Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn's classic film *Adam's Rib*.

This Hollywood interval introduced McNally to the man who would become his best friend, screen writer Don Roos (*The Opposite of Sex*, *Happy Endings*). In addition, McNally formed a professional bond with producer Norman Lear that would have consequences two decades later. For, in fall 1998, when fanatics who had neither seen nor read McNally's *Corpus Christi* picketed the play every evening during its limited run in order to protest its supposed blasphemy, Lear and his People for the American Way offered nightly counter-demonstrations in favor of free speech and religious tolerance.

During his stint in Hollywood McNally honed his skill writing screenplays. He would adapt John Cheever's short story, "The Five Forty-Eight," for PBS (1979); co-write with Wendy Wasserstein "Sam Found Out, or The Prince of Mababawe" as part of a television special that starred Liza Minelli and Lou Gossett, Jr. (1988); expand his own stage play, "Andre's Mother," into an Emmy Award-winning teleplay (*American Playhouse*, 1990); and contribute "M. Roberts (Pronounced *Roe-bare*, the 'T' and 'S' Are Silent)" to the ground-breaking anthology of teleplays on gay and lesbian life in America, *The Common Ground* (Showtime, 2000).

In addition, McNally would go on to adapt for the movie screen three of his own plays: *The Ritz* (directed by Richard Lester, 1976), *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (directed by Garry Marshall, 1991), and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (directed by Joe Mantello, 1997).

Most importantly, McNally's experience in Hollywood allowed him to draw upon a brighter palette of emotional colors for his plays by developing his skills as a farceur.

McNally's comic talent had been on display in the one-act play that he contributed to the anthology production *Morning, Noon and Night* (1968). *Noon* is a sexual farce in which five strangers are lured at lunchtime to an apartment in lower Manhattan by a personal advertisement in a *Village Voice*-style newspaper. Each expects to have his or her idiosyncratic—and, needless to say, non-complementary—desire fulfilled by a mysterious pansexual named "Dale."

McNally's original version of the play veered into tragedy as the lone gay man, Kerry, commits suicide by jumping from a window after he has been humiliated by the others, much as Clarence runs from Ruby and Sigfrid's house and is electrocuted on their fence in *And Things That Go Bump*. In the revised version, however, after the others leave, disappointed by the failure of "Dale" to appear, Kerry lingers in the apartment, only to have his sexual optimism rewarded by the arrival of yet another man looking for "Dale." The audience does not know if Kerry will finally enjoy his hoped-for gay tryst or

a new round of screwball misunderstandings is about to commence.

The revised ending of *Noon* marks a breakthrough of sorts for McNally. He would continue for fifteen years to focus upon broadly drawn, even amiably freakish, characters, but he was learning to use farce to hold at bay his nightmare of a violent universe in which the gentle and the good—and, by extension, the gay—cannot long survive.

*Bad Habits* (1974) satirizes American reliance upon psychotherapy. In Act I ("Ravenswood"), one therapist encourages patients to indulge their every whim, while in Act II ("Dunelawn") another preaches the most repressive kind of self-denial. *Whiskey* (1975) satirizes America's ambivalent valorization of alcohol consumption by focusing upon a troop of country-western television performers each of whom is named for a particular label ("Tia Maria," "Johnny Walker," "Southern Comfort," "Jack Daniels"), who die together in an alcohol-related conflagration. The edge of the satire is softened in the final scene as the dead performers look down from heaven upon the national memorial service hypocritically being held in their honor.

But it is in *The Ritz* (1975) that the artistic consequences of McNally's changing philosophy of life are placed most dazzlingly on display. *The Ritz* repeats the basic elements of McNally's early plays in that the naive Gaetano is pursued by an implacable foe in the form of his hateful Mafioso brother-in-law, much as Clarence and Marion were tormented by Ruby and the Army physician, respectively. Gaetano's radically different fate, however, depends upon the fact that he inadvertently stumbles into a gay bathhouse where the socially marginalized have formed a community that celebrates and supports identity difference.

Thus when, like Clarence, Gaetano is forced to dress in women's clothing and is mocked for it, he does so in the company of two new-found friends; and, rather than fleeing from his tormentors, Gaetano eventually stands up to his brother-in-law and grows so bold as to knee him in the groin. Likewise, Gaetano is initially—like Marion—self-conscious about his weight. But in the carnivalesque world of the bathhouse, where physical appetites are celebrated rather than made into a source of shame, Gaetano becomes the object of desire of the club's most notorious "chubby chaser."

Significantly, even though the sexual predilections of the bathhouse patrons are every bit as extreme as those on display in *Noon* and *Bad Habits*, there is no mention in *The Ritz* of the need for psychotherapy. The bathhouse community does not simply tolerate the eccentricities of its members, but warmly supports them, much as the bathhouse patrons conspire to allow Talent Night hopeful Gogie Gomez to believe that she is a legitimate performer rather than the worst singer and dancer ever to darken a stage.

Moreover, whereas an early version of the play concluded with the sadistic Mafioso being carted off to the steam room to be gang raped (poetic justice of sorts, but the continuation of the violence initiated by the thug), *The Ritz* concludes with the sexually irrepressible Chris (clearly a descendent of Kerry in *Noon*) returning to his adventuring in the baths. In farce, Eros proves stronger than Thanatos; the desire to connect outweighs the impulse to destroy.

In farce McNally found the means by which his put-upon protagonist can retain his dignity in an unsympathetic and, even, threatening world.

It also bears noting that in *The Ritz*, McNally—who, from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, would write a series of plays about the importance of physical and emotional connection—offers the first real community that appears in his canon. Sexual desire is no longer a source of shame; characters are "cured" of their painful self-consciousness, not through the machinations of a therapist, but by being accepted by other people.

"I can't believe this whole night," hapless Gaetano says at the end of his evening of screwball madness. Neither could McNally's audience. For the first time in Broadway history, homosexual desire was represented on stage not as something pathological, as in *The Boys in the Band* (1968), but as something joyous. Over the course of four hundred performances, largely heterosexual, middle- and upper-middle-class theatergoers flocked to look at actors playing gay men, naked but for a towel, making jokes about Crisco parties and steam room orgies.

Broadway's closet door was blown open by the gales of laughter emanating from the Longacre Theatre every evening. Subsequent New York revivals of the play have featured—to the delight of gay audience members—porn legends Casey Donovan (1983) and Ryan Idol (2007), making *The Ritz* an even greater comment on gay manners than heterosexual audience members may recognize.

Farce opened a new avenue for McNally that proved remarkably therapeutic, not only for his characters but for the playwright himself, as is evidenced in his final play of this period.

*Broadway, Broadway* (1978) failed in its Philadelphia try-out, largely

because Geraldine Paige had been miscast as a ditzzy novice producer hosting in her Manhattan townhouse the opening night party for a play that critics will pan. But even though McNally's play did not make it to Broadway, since there was no other show coming into town that might take its place at the theater, "Broadway, Broadway: A New Play by Terrence McNally" remained on the marquee of a dark theater for most of the season, a stark reminder of his failure. McNally has described this as the lowest point in his career since the New York critics had dismissed *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*. Not surprisingly, following the failure of *Broadway, Broadway* McNally left New York to reinvent himself in Hollywood.

On his return, however, he rewrote *Broadway, Broadway* as *It's Only a Play* (1985), the title a reminder to everyone in the theater to keep professional matters in perspective. While the play proves a rich satire of the Broadway scene, it functions ultimately as a testimonial to how artists, however egomaniacal, come together as a creative community that is able to rise from the ashes of failure.

Perfectly cast this time (Christine Baranski took the part of the inept yet naively well-intentioned producer, Julia Budder), it proved a great success. Over the course of a manic evening, an assortment of neurotic artists (lead actress, playwright, director, and their hangers-on) pass in and out of Ms. Budder's second-floor bedroom, where they retreat to snort cocaine, phone their agent, and/or hide from the mob of mercurial sycophants at the party below.

*It's Only a Play* is a psychodrama of sorts: in order to help himself get over the failure of *Broadway, Broadway*, McNally upped the ante in a farce about a failed play ("The Golden Egg")—much as twenty years later he would write the book for the musical *A Man of No Importance*, about an Irish bus conductor's being pilloried for directing a parish production of Oscar Wilde's biblically-inspired *Salome*, after McNally himself had been pilloried for his own biblically-inspired *Corpus Christi*. Like Shakespeare's Prospero, McNally used his art to heal himself.

The plays of this second major period of McNally's career proved so witty that, in her study of new American dramatists, influential theater historian Ruby Cohn thought to group McNally with Neil Simon as a master of one-liners. But Cohn failed to recognize that, beginning with *The Ritz*, an emotional expansiveness manifests itself in McNally's theater, one that seems antithetical to the outcry against social injustice and self-deception that characterizes the early plays. Clearly, McNally had to make this psychological advance before he could move on to his next deeply painful, yet ultimately transcendent, period.

#### **"We gotta connect. We just have to. Or we die."**

McNally's life—and, as a consequence, his theater—changed dramatically in the mid-1980s due to the frighteningly rapid spread of AIDS. The theater and music worlds in which McNally moved were decimated by the epidemic, and McNally spent much of his time from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s eulogizing friends and colleagues at memorial services, speaking at rallies in favor of increased support for HIV research, and writing scenes to be performed at fund-raisers to help those affected by the pandemic.

The losses that he sustained personally culminated in the 2001 death of his partner Gary Bonasarte. But the loss that had the greatest impact on McNally's theater was the death in 1986 of former lover and continued close friend Robert Drivas from AIDS-related causes, followed eight months later by that of his other closest friend, actor James Coco, from heart disease.

Shortly after delivering the eulogy for Coco at the latter's memorial service, McNally embarked on a previously scheduled two-week tour of India that he had been offered in lieu of payment for articles he had written for *Horizon* magazine. The trip had a profound effect on him at this difficult time in his life. Writing in *Horizon* following his return, McNally marveled at "the beauty of [the Indian] people who delight in the spirit and presence and wonder of each other. If Indians know something we don't, it is perhaps this sense that the greatest treasure on this planet is one another."

This quiet reveling in the joy of human interconnectedness permeates the plays that he would write across the next decade. Immediately upon his return, McNally threw himself into writing a play about an emotionally needy short order cook's attempt to win over a psychologically scared waitress. He conceived and wrote *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987) in only a matter of weeks. "We gotta connect. We just have to. Or we die," Johnny implores the emotionally defensive Frankie.

Although AIDS was not the obvious subject of the play, audiences—who had only recently learned that HIV was transmitted through bodily fluids—gasped when Johnny tenderly sucked the blood from Frankie's finger, which she had cut while preparing him a snack.

"I still don't quite know where *Frankie and Johnny* came from," McNally later wrote. "I do know I began it shortly after I had lost my



two best friends and dearest collaborators in the theater, Robert Drivas and James Coco. Friends seemed especially precious and life unbelievably fragile. I had always thought they would be in my personal and professional life forever . . . . *Frankie and Johnny* is more a poem about feelings than a true story about anyone I know. I missed Bobby and Jimmy a lot. I still do, I always will, but I missed them less while I was writing *Frankie and Johnny*."

The desire for, and accompanying impediments to, connection with another person are at the heart of every play that McNally would write during this richly productive period.

In *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989), for example, Stephen and Mendy share an obsession with opera diva Maria Callas's ability to sing so movingly of love and death. But fear of the "dark, mean, and extremely dangerous streets" that lie outside their comfortable apartment "at the height of our very own Bourbonic Plague" drives Stephen to kill his exasperated partner, Mike, as the latter attempts to leave him for a younger man. The enjoyment of opera may help ease the pain of loneliness, but obsession with opera may also intensify one's isolation by preempting intimacy with another person.

McNally's next three plays comprise an informal trilogy that addresses how the fear of difference renders life-sustaining intimacy impossible and, more specifically, that challenges the inhumanity manifested in 1980s and early 1990s America towards victims of AIDS.

In *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991), two married heterosexual couples spend the Fourth of July weekend at the Fire Island house that one of the women has inherited from a gay brother who recently died of an AIDS-related illness. Their fear of using his swimming pool lest they catch the virus which killed him, unspoken for most of the play, bespeaks a paranoia about sexual difference that infects even the most intimate of heterosexual relationships.

Conversely, *A Perfect Ganesh* (1993) offers a vision of an alternative socioreligious system in which the emotionally wounded and physically damaged are ministered to by a god who, unbeknownst to them, moves in their midst to help them overcome the obstacles to intimacy that they themselves have created. The play suggests how racial and sexual differences must be accepted as a part of life if one is to live fully and religiously.

Finally, in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), McNally offers one of the most moving responses to the AIDS epidemic by an American writer. Following the activities of eight gay men across three holiday weekends in summer, the play neutralizes the fear of death with a comic extravagance too haunting to qualify as farce. Dressed in ghostly white toile tutus, toe shoes, and feathered headdresses, six of the eight rehearse for a benefit performance of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Joining hands, they create a visual parody of the medieval Dance of Death. Yet rather than weep at their misfortune, they dance so intently that they eventually collapse in laughter at the absurdity of their earnestness.

At the climax of the play, one of the HIV-positive friends panics after seeing his lover through a health crisis. "Who's gonna be there for me when it's my turn?" he asks. His best friend assures him that "We all will. Every one of us." And indeed, that promise is kept symbolically in the last moment of the play as the men strip naked and join hands to step down into a moonlighted lake, quietly swimming out of the audience's view: they enter the waters of death and advance together to meet the unknown.

No longer need a gay man fear that he will die "unwitnessed, unheard, alone," as Clarence was tragically forced to do. Instead, in McNally's world one can now be part of a community of other gay men in whose company, and with whose support, one can brave those things that go bump in the night.

The consequence of a lack of connection with other people is on display in "Andre's Mother" (1988), a brief sketch (later expanded into an Emmy Award-winning teleplay) that bears witness to the two-fold grief of a mother who had been alienated from her adult son and must now come to accept the horrifying loss of him to AIDS. Silent throughout his memorial service, she is left alone on stage at the play's end, clutching the symbolic white balloon that the other mourners had already released. Only as she finally lets go does she utter her first sound, a heart-wrenching sob of grief for the loss of Andre and, possibly as well, of regret for not having been able to accept his nature while he was alive.

McNally continued to develop the theme of the urgency of connection even after the development of protease inhibitors in 1995 made AIDS a more effectively managed syndrome.

In *Corpus Christi* (1998), for example, he retells the biblical narratives of the life and passion of Jesus Christ in terms of the self-discovery, social ostracism, and murder of a gay teenager named Joshua in McNally's own hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas, during the 1950s, when McNally himself was growing up.

Conservative social critics were outraged by McNally's transforming the biblical Wedding Feast at Cana into a gay marriage, Jesus's cure of a leper into Joshua's compassion for a young man in an advanced stage of an HIV-related illness, and Jesus's association with Mary Magdalene into Joshua's befriending a gay hustler.

Coincidentally (and, so, all the more horrifically), the play premiered within a week of the brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard, who was beaten, stripped naked, and tied crucifixion-style to a barbed wire fence in sub-freezing temperatures outside Laramie, Wyoming, where he was left to die "unwitnessed, unheard, alone."

No other McNally play has proven so controversial. In New York theater-goers had to pass through a cordon of angry protesters outside the theater every evening, and then through a metal detector once inside the house; in London a fatwa was pronounced against McNally; and in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, local churches attempted to prevent ticket-holders from taking their seats by occupying all of the theater's parking spaces in the hours before the performance.

Ironically, all of this brouhaha was raised by people who had never seen a performance or even read the text of a work whose simple message is that every person is divine and deserving of respect.

Nearly a decade later McNally returned to his examination of the life-or-death importance of human interconnection, and the insecurities that create hindrances to satisfying human relationships, in three plays written closely together.

*Some Men* (2007) is structured as a series of vignettes of American gay life from 1922 to the present framed by the events at a present-day gay wedding. The play readily admits to the difficulties of maintaining a satisfying relationship in the gay world: sexual chemistry may not be present when other elements of attraction are; personal insecurities such as fear of social disapproval or reluctance to limit oneself to just one partner become barriers to engagement; and gay self-loathing may prove a bell jar that suffocates the most promising relationship.

Yet, at the play's end what has seemed initially to be a pastiche of loosely connected, historically organized scenes turns out to contain multiple connections among characters of different generations that could not have been anticipated by the audience. Far from living separate, disconnected lives in different cities and decades, the "some men" of McNally's title function as colored pieces of glass in the constantly changing kaleidoscope of modern gay life: names and circumstances may differ, but a desire for connection makes all gay men one.

An unsuspected unity is similarly on display in *Deuce* (2007), which focuses upon two former women's tennis doubles champions who are reunited late in life as guests of honor at the U.S. Tennis Open. McNally's tennis metaphor effectively depicts how two people with radically different *modi operandi* and performance styles may still function as an organic unit.

In *Unusual Acts of Devotion* (2008), five residents escape the stifling heat of their respective apartments on the tarred rooftop of their six-story apartment building on New York City's lower West Side one evening in summer. "Nobody can take care of themselves," hard-eyed Mrs. Damell stoically observes, "we just think we can." She echoes a sentiment voiced earlier in the play by the younger, more optimistic Nadine: "We can make each other happy so easily and we so seldom do. Put on a CD. Close the window. Open the window. Love someone. Love someone who loves you back."

The unusual acts of devotion referred to in the title range from Leo's massaging Mrs. Damell's legs, to Chick's monitoring the diabetic Leo's glucose level more conscientiously than Leo himself does, to cantankerous Mrs. Damell's offering her life for the good of her younger neighbors.

In the plays of this third major stage of his development, McNally has come 180-degrees from his early theater. As in *Let It Bleed*, a threat lies immediately outside the intimate world of the play that threatens to destroy human happiness. (At the start of *Unusual Acts*, for example, the audience sees an interloper climb onto the roof and hide behind a water tank, where his presence is periodically reaffirmed by the ominous glow of a cigarette in the darkness. As the action advances, the dance music that plays on the radio is periodically interrupted by news bulletins concerning the police search for a serial murderer on the loose in the neighborhood.) But, unlike in those early plays, McNally's later characters respond to the threat of oblivion, not in terror, but with love, valor, and compassion, thereby allowing for truly unusual acts of human devotion.

This change in perspective is reflected in the radically different style of closure manifested by the plays of this later period. Rather than continuing the style of angst-filled endings that characterize the early plays (the threatening "Thump" that is heard in the closing moments of *And Things That Go Bump* before the stage is plunged into darkness, or a screaming Marion being pulled off stage by the Military Police as the next recruit is led on in *Next*), McNally

fashions some of the luminous moments in contemporary American theater: two lovers quietly brushing their teeth while Debussy's "*Clair de Lune*" plays on the radio in *Frankie and Johnny*; four adults looking at a falling star cross the sky in *Lips Together*; two middle-aged women rendered speechless by the transcendent beauty of the Taj Mahal, only to be gently sung to sleep by the elephant-headed god in *A Perfect Ganesh*; and six men stripping naked to go for a moonlight swim in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*.

At the height of the AIDS pandemic, while fellow gay playwrights Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner raged against the dying of the light, McNally was able to release his anger and find an extraordinary peace of mind, all the more surprising considering the depth of his own grief.

### "Sing for your supper. Sing for your salvation."

McNally emerged in the 1990s as one of the most successful playwrights in America, winning four Tony Awards in a scant six years: back-to-back awards for Best Drama for *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Master Class*, and the award for Best Book for a Musical for both *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Ragtime*. The latter are a reminder of the flip side of McNally's career as one of America's premiere librettists.

Ironically, McNally's early involvement with the musical did not bode well. In 1961, having graduated the previous year from Columbia, McNally was hired to tutor the two teenaged sons of Nobel Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck as the family made a round-the-world cruise. Six years later, when Steinbeck's *East of Eden* was optioned as the basis of a musical, the novelist insisted that McNally write the book.

However, *Here's Where I Belong* (1968) proved a disaster, closing the same night that it premiered and losing its substantial investment, thereby earning from *Variety* the soubriquet "the costliest one night stand on Broadway." McNally was so frustrated by changes made to his book without his permission that he insisted that his name be removed from the program.

His second outing proved equally trying, although for very different reasons. In 1984 he was hired to write a new book for an existing score by John Kander and Fred Ebb, who were dissatisfied with the efforts of their original librettist. McNally's involvement with *The Rink* (1984) not only reversed the traditional pattern of collaboration in which the book is completed before the composer and lyricist begin work on the score, but he was also expected to create an original story that showcased the talents of stars Liza Minnelli and Chita Rivera.

Fortunately, McNally's collaboration on *The Rink* with Kander and Ebb, and with star Rivera, proved only a prelude to their greatest success, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), for which McNally adapted the novel of the same title by Manuel Puig. Focusing upon the clash between the harshness of life and the seductive yet deadly allure of fantasy, McNally explored a theme that would dominate his plays during the next decade: the ambivalently liberating and destructive nature of role-playing.

McNally collaborated with Kander, Ebb, and Rivera one final time in a musical made of Friedrich Durrenmatt's dark satire of passion and greed, *The Visit*. Originally conceived as a Broadway come-back vehicle for Angela Lansbury, who was forced by her husband's declining health to withdraw before rehearsals began, the play was well received during its try-out in Chicago. Unfortunately, it was scheduled to come into New York the week after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers. Fearing the musical too dark for the time, the producers canceled the opening. Fred Ebb's death in 2004 made it unlikely that the play will ever have a New York premiere.

But McNally's friendship with the principals has extended to other venues. In 1998 he penned the citation celebrating Kander and Ebb's decades-long collaboration when they received Kennedy Center Honors. And in 2005 he wrote an autobiographical show for Rivera titled *Chita Rivera: A Dancer's Life* in which she reflected upon her career.

McNally has collaborated successfully with other song-writing teams as well. In 1989, he translated to the musical stage E. L. Doctorow's novel, *Ragtime*, in conjunction with composer Stephen Flaherty and lyricist Lynn Ahrens. As one of the senior producers observed at the time, the project was dead in the water until McNally found a way to organize for the stage Doctorow's numerous interlocking narratives.

With Flaherty and Ahrens he also adapted for the musical stage a film script by Barry Devlin, *A Man of No Importance* (2002), about a sexually repressed, middle-aged gay bus conductor who discovers truths about himself and about the nature of community after he is ostracized by church authorities for undertaking a local production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.

Like *A Man of No Importance*, McNally's *The Full Monty* (2000,

music and lyrics by David Yazbek, adapted from a British film of the same title) dramatizes the struggle with self-acceptance, this time focusing upon a group of unemployed, lower middle-class working men who resort to stripping to support their families and to boost their deflated egos.

McNally seems to have been attracted to *Catch Me If You Can* (2011, music by Mark Shaiman, lyrics by Scott Wittman)—originally a memoir by a wildly successful forger and con man pursued for years by the FBI—because of its inherent theatricality. The essential untruthfulness of performance allows Frankie to access a deeper inner truth than he could otherwise as he successfully impersonates an airline pilot and emergency room doctor, among other professions. Unfortunately, concerned that McNally's anatomy of the psychological implications of role-playing might prove too sophisticated for a Broadway audience, the producers hired a second, uncredited writer to make the show more commercially appealing. As a consequence McNally was faulted by reviewers for comy jokes not of his making.

Who remembers the name of the author of a musical's book, McNally asked in a 2002 *New York Times* article written shortly after he had been invited to a party celebrating "Kander and Ebb's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*." "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that it will always be Bizet's *Carmen*, not Prosper Merimee's; Jerry Herman's *Mame*, not Lawrence and Lee's."

The librettist is invariably the most easily forgotten member of a show's creative team. Thus, McNally's continued involvement with musicals and operas is evidence of his enjoyment of the communal nature of theater—of brainstorming with others to flesh out an initial idea, of hurriedly writing new pages to resolve a problem that became apparent during afternoon rehearsal, of renouncing the claims of ego and doing what is best for the project.

One musical work for which McNally's libretto has been singled out for praise is *Dead Man Walking* (2000, music by Jake Heggie), one of the most successful new American operas of the past twenty years. Based on the memoir by Sister Helen Prejean, a Roman Catholic nun who ministered in prison to a man convicted of brutally raping a young woman as well as murdering both her and her boyfriend, the opera—like McNally's book for *A Man of No Importance* and his libretto for another opera, *The Food of Love* (1999, music by Robert Beaser)—translates into music the values of love, valor, and compassion on which McNally focused so movingly in his plays in the 1990s.

### "where we really and truly are"

Since 1995 McNally's plays have increasingly become an extended meditation upon the transformative powers and dangers of theater.

"Theatre is a deep reflection of the human community," McNally writes in his foreword to the print version of *A Man of No Importance*. "[T]heatre is not a place to hide from the world but instead the very place where we may finally discover our true selves." As a consequence, theater should be where audiences go in the hope of being transformed. Unfortunately, too often both audiences and actors use theater to escape into fantasy from the unsatisfying, quotidian "real" world.

McNally's understanding of the conundrum of the playwright is dramatized in an early, undated, untitled, and apparently never performed work in which a twenty-year-old playwright named Bill steps to the edge of the stage to address his audience directly: "A playwright must face the truth. If he does not face the truth his play is false and nowhere is it easier to spot a liar than in the theatre." But, Bill also acknowledges, "the theatre is full of magic—it's always fascinated me—and I take advantage of that magic as often as I can. Absolutely anything can happen when you're in a theatre." The trick is for the playwright to employ theater's magic only in the service of truth, rather than to allow it to shorten the actor's vision or to distract the audience's attention from the work of transformation waiting to be done.

There has always been a metadramatic element to McNally's theater. In *And Things That Go Bump*, for example, Ruby dresses in the torn, soiled costumes that she wore when she sang on the opera stage years earlier; she directs the evening's events as though they're a scripted drama. Similarly, in *The Lisbon Traviata*, Stephen "performs" his parting from—and murder of—Mike as though he were Don Jose at the close of Bizet's *Carmen*.

But it is in *Master Class* (1995) that McNally initiated an extraordinary meditation on the nature of theatrical truth, on the sacrifices made by the artist, as well as on what a society loses when it does not enjoy a vibrant cultural scene.

As Maria Callas teaches student performers how to interpret the arias they have selected to perform during a master class at Juilliard, the play reveals how closely Callas's own personal challenges mirrored the circumstances of the heroines whose roles she sang on stage, which proved the one place where she could be most fully

herself. The failure of the student performers to sing with the heart-breaking abandon that Callas brought to her roles stems from their reluctance to explore their deeper selves; they prefer instead to concentrate upon creating a professional persona and launching a career. Conversely, Callas's loneliness is revealed as the price that one must pay for a life of exhaustive self-examination and relentless pursuit of truth.

A pair of one-acters written just before and after *Master Class* considers the social consequences of the arts. In the as-yet-unproduced "Hidden Agendas," written around the time of the controversy concerning the National Endowment for the Arts' funding of exhibits of Robert Mapplethorpe's work, a subscriber to a performing arts complex's season addresses the center's board of trustees. "What brings us to your halls and theatres," he says, "is the expectation that the miracle of communication will take place. That a piece of music will touch us. That a dancer's movement will create a meaning where there was only space. That an aria will speak to even one of us out there in a darkened auditorium in a way that no one else ever has . . . Words, sounds, gestures, feelings, thoughts! The things that connect us and make us human. The hope for that connection! That's why we fill your theatres. I cannot imagine my life without the arts."

In "Ghost Light" (2002), written to be performed by Angela Lansbury at a benefit for Long Island's Bay Street Theater, an experienced stage actress pays a final visit to a vintage Broadway theater about to be gutted and converted into an arena for rock concerts. As she talks with a young stage manager (Chris O'Donnell), she reminisces about the performances that she has seen played on the stage, as well as those she herself has given. The career of the actress, who is leaving New York to star in a television series, parallels the fate of the theater building whose acoustics and sight lines were masterfully constructed to foster intense emotional communication between actor and audience, and which now will be a forum for noisy, overwrought spectacle.

Both of the one-act plays that make up *The Stendahl Syndrome* (2004) address the experience that a tour guide, leading a group of American tourists to view Michelangelo's *David*, explains occurs "when art speaks to something deeper in us than perhaps we understand." The original audience for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* fainted from the intensity of the emotions that his music aroused, she explains—much as the tourists in her group finally fall silent in the presence of Michelangelo's sculpture, and as Margaret and Katharine do visiting the Taj Mahal in *A Perfect Ganesh*.

Similarly, "Prelude & Liebestod" offers the thoughts of an orchestra conductor, his wife, and a gay man hoping to seduce the bisexual conductor after the concert as the former conducts Wagner with the two in the audience. "I'm only alive when I come," the conductor thinks; "the way I want to be alive: ecstatic, half-conscious, eyes closed, brain flaring, words, thoughts inadequate"—when he ejaculates *and*, the play makes clear, when he is engaged with music.

McNally's final two plays in this group form a diptych of sorts. In *Dedication, or The Stuff of Dreams* (2005), the manager of a struggling children's theater hopes to gain possession of a once glorious but long-shuttered, now-dilapidated opera house in upstate New York. His negotiation with the crusty, terminally ill property owner becomes a debate over the ambivalent power of theater either "to take us away from where we really and truly are" or to allow us to dream and soar above the mortal coil that is human existence.

Similarly, in the magisterial *Golden Age* (2012), the tension between the quotidian goings-on backstage and the sublimity of the music being performed on stage at the Paris premiere of Vincenzo Bellini's last opera, *I Puritani*, highlights the emotional chaos out of which any great work of art grows. An autumnal quality infuses the play as Bellini's raucous, blood-spewing cough suggests that his tubercular end is near and that he shall neither be able to return to his beloved sun-filled Sicily nor to complete the opera of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that he is eager to write. When asked what *I Puritani* is about, Bellini answers "forgiveness"—much as McNally's play, in the manner of Shakespeare's great romances, exhibits a calm, even transcendent, acceptance of human weakness and mortality. Neither Bellini nor, apparently, McNally himself has reason to fear any longer those things that go bump in the night.

The Off-Broadway production of a new play tentatively titled *And Away We Go* has been announced for New York in Fall 2013. A workshop production of the play at the Ojai Theater Festival in summer 2012 reveals it to be a historical panorama that extends from the opening night of Aeschylus's *The Orestia* in Periclean Athens, to the initial rehearsal of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Jacobean London, through an evening at the Theater Royal at Louis XVI's Versailles on the eve of the French Revolution, on to the first reading of Chekhov's *The Seagull* by Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theater, and finally to the closing night performance of the American premiere of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Florida in 1956. Exploring the creative tensions and

interpretive misunderstandings that produce great art, the play celebrates the resilience of thespians and the electrifying experience of live theater.

### **Conclusion: The Problem of Being a Gay Playwright**

In early 1993, during the talk-back that followed a workshop performance of *A Perfect Ganesh*, activist Larry Kramer challenged McNally for writing about two wealthy middle-aged matrons vacationing in India at a time when, Kramer argued, the AIDS epidemic was such a pressing emergency that every gay artist in America needed to be shouting himself hoarse calling for social justice. Shortly thereafter McNally was criticized by *The Advocate* for calling himself a "playwright," rather than a "gay playwright."

McNally responded in a 1996 op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Gay Theater? No, Just Life," in which he argued that continuing to identify oneself as a "gay playwright" when no heterosexual colleague felt the need to identify himself publicly as a "straight playwright" was tantamount to promulgating discrimination against gays and lesbians.

"Gay theater doesn't exist anymore," McNally wrote. "There is good theater and there is bad theater. Gay playwrights either write a play as worthy of your interest as Mr. Arthur Miller or they don't. You can't get away with a bad gay play any more than you can with serving up lousy food in a gay restaurant."

McNally's point is that a playwright who happens to be gay is only advertising the mediocrity of his work if he expects audiences to come to it primarily because it is a "gay" play.

This is not to say that McNally no longer believes in a playwright's advancing a political agenda through his work; his own agenda is simply not as aggressively in evidence in his most recent plays as it was in his early ones.

"Theater is a place to change hearts," McNally argues, "and you change minds by changing hearts first. A homophobic person's heart has to be spoken to before his mind. Change the heart and then people change their minds when they go into the voting booth." Thus, while McNally's *Some Men* is one of the most moving depictions of the pleasures and pains of gay relationships to grace the boards in recent years, it is anything but a jeremiad in favor of gay marriage.

McNally's later plays combine to make a "theater of empathy" (in contradistinction to Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty") in which audiences emerge from the theater more aware of what happens to humans both as individuals and as a society when people act without compassion for others.

As a playwright, McNally says, his primary purpose is to "find what connects us." When theater works, he says, "I find it deeply moving, it can be very funny, very bold, very dramatic, touching, you feel connected to people around you in a way. Whether there are ninety-nine seats or fifteen hundred, when a play works well, there's a sense of community and you feel connected to your fellow humans. That's how it should be."

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Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature, on English adaptations of Biblical literature, and on contemporary gay literature and theater. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture* and author of numerous entries at [glbtq.com](http://glbtq.com). His work on Terrence McNally has been aided by study at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas.



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